

## *The Jester's Wife*

SCHEHEREZADE:

It is related, O auspicious king, that a certain jester lived at the court of Harun al-Rashid.

*[The finger cymbals ring once. The JESTER is at the end of his joke and may offer a different punch line if he likes.]*

JESTER:

... and so the camel said to the merchant, "And with prices like these, you won't be getting many more."

HARUN AL-RASHID [*not amused*]:

You are a bachelor, are you not?

JESTER [*slowly*]:

Yes.

HARUN AL-RASHID:

Yes. Well, I have conceived a keen—

JESTER:

Don't say it—

HARUN AL-RASHID:

desire to—

JESTER:

No, no—

HARUN AL-RASHID:

see you married.

JESTER [*kneeling*]:

King of Time, I pray you, spare me that felicity. I am a bachelor through fear of the sex; I have abstained so that I may never happen upon some debauched, adulterous, woman. I pray you to think of all my faults and all the ignoble qualities of my life and, as a punishment for them, deny me the blessing of matrimony.

HARUN AL-RASHID:

Well, I can't help your feelings. Today you must be married.

JESTER:

It's just that I—

HARUN AL-RASHID:

Today!

JESTER:

All right! All right! All right!

[*A modest-seeming young bride, the JESTER'S WIFE, approaches. HARUN AL-RASHID departs.*]

SCHEHEREZADE:

For half a year, or maybe seven months, the jester lived at peace with his new bride, a beautiful and modest-seeming girl, but after that there happened that which was fated to happen, for no man can escape his destiny.

JESTER:

I have been invited to go out into the gardens this afternoon to take the good air with my friends.

JESTER'S WIFE [*collapsing in tears*]:  
Oh, no!

JESTER:  
If you want me for anything, you will know where to send.

JESTER'S WIFE [*bravely stifling her tears*]:  
No one will want you to do anything but enjoy yourself. If you take  
a delight in the gardens, it will be an equal delight for me.

JESTER:  
Farewell.

JESTER'S WIFE:  
Farewell, my sweet.

JESTER:  
Farewell.

JESTER'S WIFE:  
Farewell, my love.

JESTER:  
Farewell.

[*He goes.*]

JESTER'S WIFE [*ripping off her veil*]:  
Praise Allah! I've gotten rid of that wild pig for one afternoon! Now  
I will send for my heart's delight!

[*A knock sounds at the door.*]

Who can that be? Not that dog of a husband back again, I hope.

*[The PASTRYCOOK appears. He is covered in flour, wears an apron, and carries a rolling pin. Music.]*

O my pastrycook!

PASTRYCOOK:  
My tart!

JESTER'S WIFE:  
You are earlier than usual.

PASTRYCOOK:

I am. When I had prepared my dough and rolled it and leavened it and stuffed it with almonds and pistachios, I noticed that it was still too early for customers to be dropping by. So I said to myself: Shake the flour from your clothes, my friend, and go to rejoice a little with your sweet!

*[She leaps on him. They run around shouting and twirling in a wild frenzy.]*

*Time to make the doughnuts!*

*[There is a knock at the door. The music ends.]*

Who can that be?

JESTER'S WIFE:  
I don't know. Go and hide yourself in the privy while I see.

*[The PASTRYCOOK hides. The GREENGROCER appears. He has a basket of long vegetables. Music.]*

O my greengrocer! You are a little too soon!

GREENGROCER:

That's right. But as I was returning from my kitchen garden this morning, I thought, You had better take your fresh vegetables, your heroic cucumber, your exceptional pumpkin, and your embarrassing butternut to your sweet, for they will rejoice her!

*[They leap on each other, madly happy.]*

Climb my vine! Climb my vine! Reap and sow! Reap and sow!

*[There is a knock at the door. The music ends.]*

Who's there?

JESTER'S WIFE:

I don't know! Go and hide in the privy while I see.

GREENGROCER *[entering the privy and finding the PASTRYCOOK]*:  
Who are you? Why are you here?

PASTRYCOOK:

I've been doing what you've been doing, and I'm in here for the same reason as yourself!

*[They hide. The BUTCHER appears with a lambskin. Music.]*



JESTER'S WIFE:  
My sweet butcher!

BUTCHER:  
My sweet meat!

JESTER'S WIFE:  
You are too soon!

BUTCHER:  
When I had finished slaughtering all my lambs for the day, I thought, You had better take your sweet this sheepskin; it will be a soft carpet for her head, and she will start her morning well for you! Bleat for me!

*[They begin to roll around, playing, making little farm-animal noises. There is a knock at the door. The music ends.]*

Who's that?

JESTER'S WIFE:  
Quick! Take your sheepskin and hide in the privy!

*[He does so. The CLARINETIST appears with his instrument, flexing his muscles. Music.]*

O my clarinet player! You are too soon!

CLARINETIST:  
When I went to my rehearsal today, none of the other players had come and so I determined to wait in the dwelling of my sweet! Come here my little piccolo!

*[He chases her around; she shrieks in delight.]*

We seem to be a little flat today, just a little flat! Come now!  
*Practice! Practice!*

*[He catches her and starts to spank her as she spans him in turn.  
There is a knock at the door. The music ends.]*

Who is that?

JESTER'S WIFE:

Allah alone knows! Perhaps it is my husband! Take your clarinet  
and hide yourself in the privy!

CLARINETIST *[at the privy]*:

Peace be with you, friends! What are you doing in this singular  
apartment?

PASTRYCOOK, GREENGROCER, AND BUTCHER:

Peace be with you, friend! Same thing as yourself!

*[They hide; the JESTER enters.]*

JESTER:

Give me an infusion of anise and fennel, good wife! Things are  
moving! Things are moving! I couldn't stay at the garden any  
longer. I had to come home to relieve my—

*[He opens the door to the privy. Everything stops.]*

SCHEHEREZADE:

The jester realized at once the exact nature of his predicament. But

what if these four lovers should turn on him and kill him to hide their crime? He decided to try a trick.

JESTER [*bowing to the ground*]:

O sacred messengers of Allah, I know you, I recognize you well! You who are all white and floury might be mistaken for a pastrycook by the profane, but you are without doubt the holy patriarch Job, the ulcerous. And you, O saint with the box of excellent vegetables, must be the great Khidr, who guards each orchard, who clothes each tree with a green diadem. And you, with the lion's skin, surely you are Cleopatra, queen of the Nile! And you, you, O glorious angel with the heavenly horn, are certainly Israfil, who shall summon us on the last day!

PASTRYCOOK [*terrified but assuming a divine air*]:

You are not mistaken, O man! We are even as you have named us, and we have come to earth through your privy because we wished to enter your house and reward you for your great virtue.

BUTCHER [*following suit*]:

We could find no other chamber open to the sky.

JESTER:

Since you have done me the honor of this visit, O illustrious saints, will you grant me one wish?

PASTRYCOOK GREENGROCER, BUTCHER, AND CLARINETIST:

Speak! Speak!

JESTER:

Come with me to the palace of Harun al-Rashid. He will be greatly obliged when I introduce four such famous visitors to him.



GREENGROCER [*caught up in the glory of it all*]:  
We shall grant you that particular grace!

[*There is a little parade to the palace. The lovers are frightened. Some funereal music. HARUN AL-RASHID comes forward.*]

JESTER:

O my lord. Allow me to present to you four sacred personages: our lord Job; our lord Khidr; Cleopatra, queen of the Nile; and the angel Israfil, who shall announce the Last Judgment. I found them in my privy, my lord, and I owe the great honor of their visit to the saintly qualities of the wife whom you so generously gave to me.

HARUN AL-RASHID:

Have you gone mad or are you trying to kill me?

JESTER:

I only tell you what I have seen.

HARUN AL-RASHID:

Do you not see that the prophet Job is a pastrycook, the prophet Khidr is a greengrocer, the queen of the Nile is a butcher, and the angel Israfil is my first clarinet, the master of my music?

JESTER:

I only tell you what I have seen.

HARUN AL-RASHID:

Sons and daughter of a thousand shameless horns! Tell me the truth: you are the lovers of that wife of his!

PASTRYCOOK, GREENGROCER, BUTCHER, AND CLARINETIST:

Well, we . . . it seems . . .

HARUN AL-RASHID:

On your knees, dogs! O Father of Wisdom, I grant you your divorce! A curse on all women! And you, you lovers, shall have your eggs torn from you. I've never heard such a story in all my life! Guards!

SCHEHEREZADE [*coming forward to join the PASTRYCOOK*]:

But, quick as lightning, the pastrycook came forward, kissed the ground, and said,

SCHEHEREZADE AND PASTRYCOOK:

O most auspicious king, if I tell you a story more wonderful still than the story of our adventure in the house of this honorable man perhaps you may see your way clear to sparing my eggs?

SCHEHEREZADE:

And the honorable Harun al-Rashid said,

HARUN AL-RASHID:

It is permitted.

SCHEHEREZADE:

And the pastrycook began at once the story of "The Dream."

*[The finger cymbals ring once. The following might be staged with the company asleep in a row on the floor, changing positions in sleep every now and then. The various characters—the POOR MAN, the MAN IN THE DREAM, the THIEVES, the FAMILY, and the rest—rise from this line when they speak, cross over one another when they*

*move, and sink back into sleep when they are done. They sometimes speak as a chorus, in their sleep.]*

**PASTRYCOOK:**

It is related, but Allah is all wise and all knowing, that one night in Baghdad, a poor man lay down to sleep. While some in the city had fine carpets, and some in the city had fine palaces and fine pillows for their heads, he had only the bare floor in his little hut at the end of a cobbled street lined with palm trees and a gray stone courtyard containing a dry and cracked little fountain with a design of birds upon it. All of us are equal in our sleep, and in our sleep all of us may speak to God and hear our destiny revealed. This night the poor man lay down with a heavy heart, and a man came to him in a dream.

**MAN IN THE DREAM:**

My poor man, know that your fortune lies far away in Cairo. Go and seek it there.

**CHORUS** [*turning in their sleep*]:

Your fortune lies far away in Cairo. Go and seek it there.

**PASTRYCOOK:**

The very next morning the poor man set out for Cairo, and after many weeks and much hardship, he arrived in that city.

**CHORUS** [*turning in their sleep*]:

Night fell. He could not afford to stay at an inn, so he lay down to sleep in the courtyard of a mosque.

**THIEVES:**

That night robbers entered the mosque and from there broke into an adjoining house.



FAMILY:

Awakened by the noise, the owners raised the alarm and called for help.

POLICE:

The police arrived, found the poor man from Baghdad, beat him, and threw him into jail.

PASTRYCOOK:

Three days later, the chief of police ordered his men to bring the stranger before him.

CHIEF OF POLICE:

Where do you come from?

POOR MAN:

I come from Baghdad.

CHIEF OF POLICE:

And what brought you to Cairo?

POOR MAN:

A man came to me in a dream, saying,

POOR MAN AND MAN IN THE DREAM:

My poor man, your fortune lies far away in Cairo. Go and seek it there.

POOR MAN:

But when I came to Cairo, the fortune I was promised proved to be the beating your men so generously gave me.

CHIEF OF POLICE:

What a fool to believe in dreams! Know this: I too have heard a voice in my sleep, not just once but three times. It said,

CHIEF OF POLICE AND PASTRYCOOK:

Go to Baghdad and find a little hut at the end of a cobbled street lined with palm trees and a gray stone courtyard containing a dry and cracked little fountain with a design of birds upon it. Under that old fountain a great sum of money lies buried. Go there and dig it up.

CHIEF OF POLICE:

But did I go? Of course not! Yet fool that you are, you have come all the way to Cairo on the strength of one idle dream. Here, take this.

*[He tosses the POOR MAN a coin.]*

It will help you on your way back to your own country.

PASTRYCOOK:

The poor man recognized at once that the house and garden described in the dream of the chief of police were his own. He took the money and set out promptly on his homeward journey.

CHORUS *[turning in their sleep]*:

Go on back to Baghdad, City of Peace and Poets. Your fortune is in the garden of your home.

PASTRYCOOK:

As soon as he reached his house he went into the garden, dug beneath the fountain, and uncovered a great treasure.



CHORUS:

Your fortune is in the garden of your home.

PASTRYCOOK:

And thus the words of the dream were wondrously fulfilled.

CHORUS [*turning in their sleep*]:

Your fortune is in the garden of your home and speaks to you in dreams.

[*The scene dissolves back to the court of HARUN AL-RASHID.*]

HARUN AL-RASHID:

That is an excellent tale indeed, Pastrycook, if it is true. But whether it is true or not, I do pardon you.

SCHEHEREZADE:

With that the butcher came forward, kissed the ground, and said,

SCHEHEREZADE AND BUTCHER:

Most excellent king, grant me the same favor as my colleague the pastrycook, and I will tell you an even fairer tale—a tale that may inspire you to generous deeds.

HARUN AL RASHID:

It is permitted.

SCHEHEREZADE:

And the butcher began the tale of "The Contest of Generosity."

[*The finger cymbals ring once.*]